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JACQUIE STURM, FOURTH FROM LEFT, WITH THE NAPIER GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL 'A' BASKETBALL TEAM (PHOTO: TORCHBEARER, THE SCHOOL'S 1943 YEARBOOK)

## Today we publish a poem by J.C. Sturm that has been lost for 70 years

**Paul Millar** | Guest writer  
Essay

**Sturm's literary executor Paul Millar introduces the poem – and the poet.**

*Read the poem 'Brown Optimism' in full [here](#).*

If you think colonisation has been good for Māori, then at first glance **Jacqueline Cecilia Sturm** must seem like exhibit number one. Adopted from an impoverished iwi,

Jacquie excelled in mainstream New Zealand schools, won sports and academic trophies, received a scholarship to university, became the first Māori woman to earn a New Zealand Master of Arts degree, had a celebrated career as a special collections librarian, published books of poetry and short stories as J.C. Sturm, won a New Zealand book award, and received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University of Wellington.

And yet the little girl born Te Kare Papuni, whose mother died from septicaemia shortly after her birth in 1927, and whose grandmother gave her up for adoption during the Depression to spare her the deprivation disproportionately affecting iwi, knew precisely how damaging colonialism was for even the most “fortunate” Māori.

Usually the only Māori child in any classroom, Sturm was targeted at primary school by “big kids [who] would call me ‘n\*\*\*\*r’ and bad names and beat me up if they caught me”. She wrote about it in an essay ‘Wanting the Stars to Play with’, for the book *Growing up Māori*, edited by Witi Ihimaera. “[My adopted mother] tried to explain the meaning of the word ‘n\*\*\*\*r’ but I had a block about it and I didn’t want to know. As far as I was concerned it meant being something that plunged you into a nightmare of fear and pain.”

School became more tolerable as Sturm learned to adapt and succeed. She also learned she was part of a project to demonstrate the benefits of colonisation.

“I had taken on board the expectations of the Sturms, their friends and my teachers. I was expected to, simply because I was Māori, sing in harmony naturally, play any musical instrument by ear, have a perfect sense of rhythm, excel in all sports, especially team sports, be good at arts and crafts and anything that required manual dexterity, and I was, of course, a ‘born’ orator. I was also expected to be easygoing, happy-go-lucky, friendly, generous, have an unfailing sense of humour, and underneath all that, a certain dignity, even nobility. (Remember the Noble Savage?) If that lot makes you cringe, imagine if you can what my life would have been like if I’d been saddled with a matching set of negative expectations, as so many Māori children were then and still are. I was one of the lucky ones.”

She summarised the outcome of her good luck in the poem ‘In Loco Parentis’ (1996):

Twenty years they planted, nurtured

Trained, pruned, grafted me

Only to find a native plant

Will always a native be.

How being out of step, place, tune, joint

In time became a preference

Not a pain, hardly matters now.

– J.C. Sturm, *Dedications*, p. 75

Although the experience of dislocation in Sturm's own life may have come to matter less over time, there is plenty of evidence that had she heard a member of the New Zealand Parliament say in 2021 that colonisation had been good for Māori, she would have had a strong response.

One newly-discovered piece of evidence is the poem 'Brown Optimism,' probably written around 1947-48 when Sturm was in her early 20s. Despite being seven decades old, the poem still burns fiercely with righteous anger at the damage colonisation has done to Māori. Composed in near-perfect iambic pentameter with patterns of alliteration and internal rhyme for thematic emphasis, 'Brown Optimism' seems written to be spoken. While the poem's anger is palpable, its optimism rejects the status quo and demands equality for Māori: a demand which, in today's terms, comes close to biculturalism founded upon **mana motuhake**.

Ironically, the success of Te Kare Papuni/Jacqueline Cecilia Sturm in the Pākehā world didn't extend to readily having her writing published. Had Sturm's books come out when she was writing like this in her 20s, rather than some decades later, we might all be familiar with the distinctive voice that produced such a candid response to anyone who thinks colonisation – "a losing game with loaded dice" – has been good for Māori.

### How 'Brown Optimism' came to light

Before Jacquie died in 2009 she made me her literary executor. Since then my focus has been on getting as much of her writing as possible out to a wider readership, and encouraging people to engage with her work. Lately there has been a growing interest in J.C. Sturm, and I think she would be gratified that younger Māori and Pasifika women artists and writers seem to feel an affinity with her.

For some time I'd been intending to edit all of her writing – published, unpublished and uncollected – into a single volume so that she can be fully appreciated for what she



achieved. That time has happily arrived, and getting the book out this year, published by Steele Roberts Aotearoa, is a priority. Our hope is that a new generation of readers will pick up J.C. Sturm and take her with them into the future.

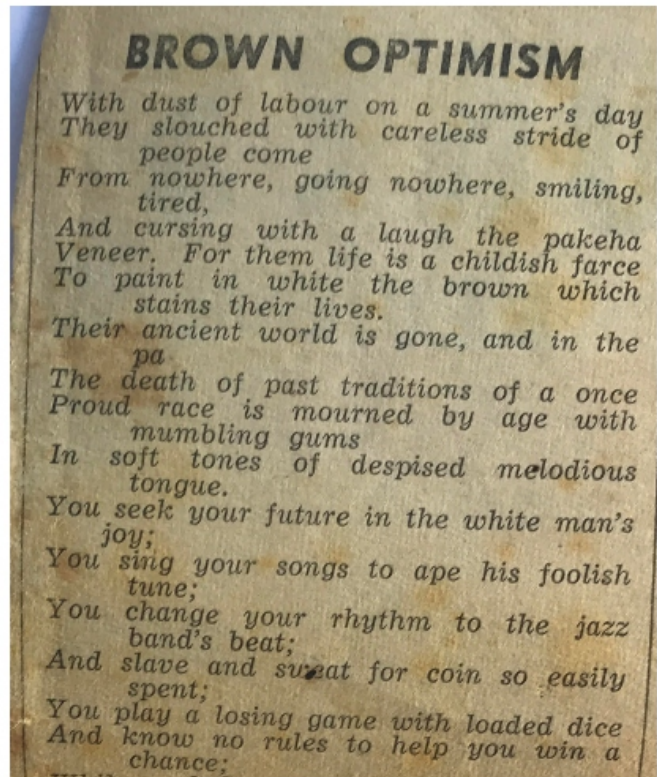
About a month ago I spent a day with John Baxter and Roger Steele going through 10 boxes of Jacquie's papers. Among those papers was a lot of unpublished work, including at least one new story and a detailed journal of her time in India in the late 1950s. I've so far located 10 early poems from the 1940s, some of them extremely good, particularly an evocative long poem from 1946 called 'Haunted Rock,' set in Pukerua Bay. 'Brown Optimism' was among those papers – a newsprint cutting with no publication details, but with the characteristic "J.C." at the end, which was how she signed all her early work. I think it is likely that the poem was published in a student newspaper, possibly at Otago, and as soon as I can I intend to go searching for it, and anything else I can find. I wouldn't be at all surprised if there are other poems by "J.C." in various student magazines from between 1946-1952. That said, I wouldn't have known about this poem if it hadn't been among Jacquie's papers – she obviously thought it was worth keeping.

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Brown Optimism, by J.C. Sturm



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## Poetry season: A dip in the deep briny blue with Grace Iwashita-Taylor

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